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Armenian Church Severs Relations With  
Prelacy

Daily newspapers as indicated

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SECURITY INFORMATION

ARMENIAN CHURCH BREAKS OFF RELATIONS WITH PRELACY

[Numbers in parentheses refer to appended sources]

The Sourp Yerrortoutun Armenian Apostolic Church of Fresno, California [Dashnak], has severed its relationship with the Prelacy of California and the central executive committee of the Armenian Apostolic Church in protest against the dictatorial action of the prelacy in refusing to approve Reverend Yeghise Mechitarian as minister.

This decision was reached by the unanimous vote of 217 qualified members of the church at a special membership meeting held on 28 September 1951. (1) The Sourp Yerrortoutun Church had been claiming for some time that the Prelacy of California and its officials are the tools of the Communist Party, and that they receive their direction from Kevork VI, the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who is a prisoner of the USSR and receives his orders from Moscow. (2).

The events leading to this break may be outlined as follows: On 23 June, Sourp Yerrortoutun Church held a membership meeting under the chairmanship of Reverend Sarkisian, temporary minister of the church, for the primary purpose of electing a pastor. The meeting was conducted according to the regulations of the Apostolic Church, and Reverend Yeghise Mechitarian was elected pastor by the vote of more than three fourths of the membership. This decision of the church was forwarded to the Prelacy of California and the Central Executive on 2 July. After waiting for 5 weeks for an answer from the Prelacy, the trustees of the church invited the newly elected pastor to conduct mass on Saint Deiparous Sunday and announced it in the newspapers. The day before the scheduled service, a wire was received from Archbishop Vartan Kasparian, acting Prelate of California, forbidding Reverend Yeghise to officiate. "The trustees of the church could not obey this order since it was contrary to democratic principles and the rights of the congregation of the church", according to the tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Church. (1)

- 1 - RESTRICTED

## RESTRICTED

At a subsequent meeting, Reverend Yeghishe's credentials and the legal method of the election were presented to the Prelate of California. However, the Prelate refused to ratify the election on the basis on information received from questionable sources [Communist] (1) and on the grounds that Reverend Yeghishe had not come to America from France with the approval of Reverend Artavast Surmeian, Archbishop of France." (2) [This is the same Archbishop Surmeian, delegate of the Catholics of Echmiadzin, who was ordered by the [French] government to leave France within 48 hours because of his pro-USSR activities. However, he died suddenly, prior to his departure, according to Iraper, 9 October 1951.]

As a result of this severance of relations, Reverend Yeghishe has been defrocked by the Prelacy.

This, says Hairenik, is an "illegal action such as is seldom seen within the ranks of our church. An unfair act against a worthy priest, legally elected by the congregation, shows contempt of the will of the people and of democratic procedures." (1)

Nor Or writes that "The Sourp Yerrortoutun Church has never recognized the Prelacy and has never conformed to any of the decisions of the conference of representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church if they are not in line with Dashnak ideas and policies, directed against the Armenian SSR and Echmiadzin." (2)

Baikal, in commenting on the matter, writes: "The Sourp Yerrortoutun Church had been detached from the California Prelacy for many years. It became affiliated with the Prelacy only a few years ago through the efforts of Archbishop Karekin Hachadourian, formerly of California and presently Patriarch of Istanbul. It is not surprising that it has decided to break away again." (3)

The trustees of the Sourp Yerrortoutun Church believe that the centuries-old traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the rights of its people are being trampled upon by the Moscow-directed Prelacy. "In

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the past," they say, "we have tolerated their unjust tactics in order not to harm the unity and solidarity of the community. However, we now feel that it is time to break off relations completely with the Prelacy of California and the central executive committee, as well as with the Patriarchy, because to follow its orders means disloyalty to the US." (4)

Asbaraz [Dashnak newspaper of Fresno] points out that the election of Reverend Yeghishhe Mechitarian was conducted legally and was blessed by the presiding priest of the day, Reverend Der Duseg, who later reversed his position. "They called our priest insubordinate and an agitator because he refused to sign the loyalty papers presented to him [by the prelacy]. How many loyalty oaths must our priests sign? Have other Armenian priests - Kasakjian, Odian, Kalfayan - signed these loyalty papers? Do you think we are in the USSR?" "The acting prelate of California wanted Soupp Yerrortoutun Church to hold requiem services for bishops Aslanian and Mazlemian. Since when has our church started holding requiem services for Cheka workers? Since when have our churches been used to distribute Soviet newspapers and literature to the Armenian community?" "Soupp Yerrortoutun Church would recognize Echmiadzin and its authority today if its activities remain within the sphere of religion, if it does not get involved in international politics and economic questions. (5).

Hairenik, referring to another instance of Soviet domination of the Armenian mother church, accuses Bishop Nersisian and the Episcopal meeting of introducing changes in the traditional rites and rituals of the Armenian Apostolic Church in order that it may conform to that of the Orthodox church. Changes are observed in method of conducting high mass, special saint day services, funeral and other ecclesiastical services, dates of holidays, etc. It is pointed out that such action, without the authority of the national Ecclesiastical meeting, is illegal and sacrilegious. "It is these disreputable representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who have the audacity to defrock a worthy, loyal priest, Yeghishhe Mechitarian, who for 9 years has been acting archbishop of southern France, and has gl-

- 3 - RESTRICTED

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ven conscientious and self-sacrificing service to our National Church".

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1. Boston, Hairenik, 23 Oct 51
2. Fresno, Nor Or, 19 Oct 51
3. Boston, Baikar, 16 Oct 51
4. Boston, Hairenik, 26 Oct 51
5. Fresno, Asbarez, 23 Oct 51
6. Boston, Hairenik, 1 Nov 51.

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- 4 -

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